

Too close or too far

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As a young minister in my early 20s, I was often admonished by the senior ministers to keep a guarded distance from laypeople. To get too close, they would say, is to become too familiar with a resulting loss of one's ministerial authority. They thought authority was protected by distance and diminished by relationships.

Laypeople and clergy alike struggle with the notion of different rules for different roles. Does it necessarily follow that to become familiar with people is to compromise your ability to lead them? Some people are more inclined to participate when a bond of friendship and familiarity has been established. Others prefer to maintain a certain distance even when they're invited to come closer. Mainliners often drop the pretense of titles, while African American congregants are more inclined to ascribe to their clergy certain titles of respect. Some people chafe under any notion of hierarchical authority; others see it as ordained of God.

Some barriers of ministerial authority need to come down. Ours is a more casual, less formal world. We view our clergy leadership as professional equals, and while we respect them for what they do in matters religious, we see no need to put them on a pedestal. There's something that rings hollow about religious pomp and circumstance; it can strike us as both vain and counterfeit.

But when does our desire to avoid elevating clergy above what is prudent get in the way of our hearing them bring to us a word from God? There is a danger in unbridled familiarity closing our hearts to this good news.

Jesus returns home to Nazareth and begins to teach in the town's synagogue. While the people are at first pleased with his gracious words, they cannot quite get it out of their minds that he is the son of Joseph. Their familiarity with him prevents them from fully hearing and believing what he has to say.

And it is this lack of belief in Jesus--in this one they think they know all too well--that in turn prevents him from ministering to them in a powerful way. According to Mark, Jesus can do no deed of power in Nazareth, except that he lays his hands on a few sick people and cures them. Although Jesus is known to marvel at great faith, here he marvels at the people's great unbelief. His own town and his own relatives do not believe in him.

Ministers fail from time to time, for a whole host of reasons. (This passage includes a ritual for failure for those engaged in ministry.) Seeing ministers as more than human can be a problem when they end up being just that. But to say that they are just like the rest of us--that they bring nothing of note and distinction to the table--is to open ourselves to missing the ways God works through people who have given themselves to ministry in the best and most uplifting ways.

Our task is to strike that proper balance: a way to be enriched by our friendships with clergy while at the same time being blessed by their roles as servants of the Word of God.